

# Post-Truth

Philosophy, Sociology, and Media Studies



9 – 11 December 2019

FILCOM UniBo – Via Azzo Gardino 23 – Sala Rossa

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# Post-Truth: Philosophy, Sociology, and Media Studies Programme

	Monday 9.12.2019	Tuesday 10.12.2019	Wednesday 11.12.2019
10.00-11.10		<b>Steve Fuller</b> <i>Can Universities Survive the Post-Truth Era?</i>	<b>Tommaso Piazza</b> <i>Fake News Consumption and Epistemic Blame</i>
11.10-11.30		Coffee Break	Coffee Break
11.30-12.40		<b>Thomas Grundmann</b> <i>Facing Epistemic Authorities: Where Democratic Ideals and Critical Thinking Mislead Cognition</i>	<b>Axel Gelfert</b> <i>Fake News, False Beliefs, and the Fallible Art of Knowledge Maintenance</i>
12.40-14.00		Lunch	Lunch
14.00-15.10		<b>Massimiliano Badino</b> <i>Truth, Truthfulness, and Post-Truth: Epistemological Prospects</i>	<b>Fabiana Zollo</b> <i>Dealing with Digital Misinformation: a Polarised Context of Narratives and Tribes</i>
15.00-15.10	<b>Carlo Gentili</b> <i>Greetings and Opening Speech</i>		
15.10-16.20	<b>Franca D'Agostini</b> <i>(Mis)Understanding Truth</i>	<b>Filippo Ferrari &amp; Sebastiano Moruzzi</b> <i>Towards an Epistemology of Post-Truth</i>	<b>Giovanni Maddalena</b> <i>Three Defences against Fake News</i>
16.20-16.50	Coffee Break	Coffee Break	Coffee Break
16.50-18.00	<b>Massimo Dell'Ultri</b> <i>The Fakeness of Post-Truth</i>	<b>Katherine Furman</b> <i>On Trusting Neighbours More Than Experts: An Ebola Case Study</i>	<b>Anna Maria Lorusso</b> <i>Fake News and Post-Truths: between Hermetic Semiosis and Gossips</i>
20.00		Workshop Dinner	

# Post–Truth: Philosophy, Sociology, and Media Studies Abstracts

**Franca D'Agostini** (Università degli Studi di Milano Statale)

## *(Mis)understanding Truth*

Recently, there have been many efforts of 'unifying' the theory of truth, but (in my judgement) they have substantially failed. This has happened because in truth–theories there are rooted misunderstandings that prevent solving, dissolving or reducing disagreements and redundancies. I will briefly consider four (two major and two minor) misunderstandings that are not so often mentioned, in the literature. Then I will show that some conditions in current philosophical practices are effective hindrances for the development of a philosophical account of truth. More specifically: the concept of truth typically resists standard methods of philosophical analysis. To understand truth one has to reform philosophy.

**Massimo Dell'Utri** (Università di Sassari)

## *The Fakeness of Post–Truth*

The account of post–truth my talk is based on is the one to the effect that post–truth is the property sentences possess out of subjective feelings and sentiments, with complete disregard for objective facts (being these tied to political aims or not). As is generally agreed, this property paves the way to the phenomenon of fake news and, more generally, disinformation—i.e., the spreading of claims lacking any objective validity whatsoever. From this perspective, post–truth represents an intellectual disease. The following is a general assumption of my talk: post–truth is less a matter for philosophical scrutiny than a matter for sociological or psychological research. (This however does not exempt philosophers from trying an analysis.) If that is the case, an antidote to post–truth is easily, if roughly, pointed to: education. Indeed, if the majority of people acquired a well–educated and self–disciplined general knowledge (and a general sensitivity and mother–wit as well), then the dissemination of disinformation would become increasingly difficult. What this antidote should consist in is touched upon by the end of the talk: the latter goes on focusing on the metaphysical and epistemological backgrounds of post–truth. As to the former, given the close relationship between truth and the world, and given that a post–true sentence isn't based on objective facts but subjective emotions, it is argued that the world tied to a post–true sentence is a fake world. Therefore, irrealism or constructivism or solipsism might be possible candidates for the post–truth metaphysical background. Each option gets then a separate analysis. As to the epistemological background, it is argued that people who subscribe to post–true sentences are kept in a monological belief system, where “each of the beliefs serves as evidence for each of the other beliefs” (Goertzel 1994: 740), with no reference to experience and facts. What is really lost is a sound procedure of beliefs' justification. Both backgrounds allow to make a parallel between the idea of “Equivalence” as stated by Lee McIntyre (“There is equal value between two points of view”, 2018: 173) as typical of the post–truth era, and Paul Boghossian's “Doctrine of Equal Validity” (“There are many radically different, yet 'equally valid' ways of knowing the world”: 2006: 2) as a mark of postmodernist relativism. Accordingly, I submit that one can level toward post–truth the same criticism usually leveled toward radical relativism and postmodernism (the latter taken as the conviction that ‘there is nothing outside of the text’). Roughly, people that really think that we live in a post–modern world fall pray of the failure to see that there is a third path between a statement having a nonhuman absolute and universal validity, on the one hand, and a validity merely tied to the subjective cognitive sphere, on the other. Hence, if we really manage to see that there is enough room for a sound notion of objectivity in our intellectual activity, and that it represents a presupposition of our thinking and talking, then we may come to realize that, on closer inspection, post–truth is a fake.

**Steve Fuller** (University of Warwick)

## *Can Universities Survive the Post–Truth Era?*

There is a tendency to see ‘post–truth’ disparagingly as the result of populist anti–intellectualism. Some would go further and dismiss ‘post–truth’ as simply a temporary turn in fortunes for the academics and other elites who have been shown wanting as a result of the Brexit vote and Trump's election. I believe that both assessments of the post–truth condition are wrong. Drawing on my latest book, *Post Truth: Knowledge as a Power Game*, I shall argue that regardless of what happens to Brexit or Trump, the post–truth condition is here to stay – and, in a certain sense, has

always been with us. In particular, we should see our epistemic predicament as part of the growth pains of the democratisation of knowledge, an inevitable consequence of which is the downgrading of expert judgement. I shall discuss what this means in terms of how universities should re-position themselves.

**Thomas Grundmann** (Universität zu Köln)

*Facing Epistemic Authorities: Where Democratic Ideals and Critical Thinking Mislead Cognition*

Disrespect for the truth, the rise of conspiracy thinking, and a pervasive distrust in experts are widespread features of current politics and public opinion. Among the many good explanations of these phenomena one is only rarely discussed: There is a strong disanalogy between democratic ideals and epistemic norms. From the perspective of democracy, all citizens are equal and should be respected as independent voters. From an epistemic point of view, epistemic inequality (between experts and laypeople) is inevitable and laypeople are often rationally required to simply defer to epistemic authorities. In my talk I will argue that confusing democratic and epistemic ideals can undermine trust in experts. I will then explain in more detail why we should often defer to experts without using any of our own reasons about the subject matter. Moreover, I will show what place is left for critical thinking and why this does not lead to blind trust in authorities.

**Massimiliano Badino** (Università di Verona)

*Truth, Truthfulness, and Post-Truth: Epistemological Prospects*

Traditionally considered the central value of epistemology, the concept of truth seems nowadays in a state of crisis. On the one hand, researches in cognitive sciences, argumentation theory, and theory of bounded rationality have undermined the old idea that we reason to obtain primarily truth. Hugo Mercier and Dan Sperber, for example, have recently advocated the view that our argumentative practices aim at supporting our intuitive opinions in debate rather than getting optimal beliefs. Likewise, Gerd Gigerenzer's work has made clear that we are routinely faced with problems which are intractable if tackled by the methods historically considered as rational and must be solved by "fast and frugal" heuristics. On the other hand, political events such as the election of President Trump or the Brexit odyssey as well as worrisome cultural phenomena such as vaccine and climate change denials seem to question, if not the whole idea of truth, at least its normative role in society. Now more than ever, epistemology is urged to renovate itself lest it loses contact with our present ethical and political life. In this paper, I outline the prospects of epistemology in this so-called post-truth era. I argue for two main claims. Firstly, we need to enrich our conceptualization of epistemic life by considering the intentional and the performative dimensions. This enriched framework gives us a better handle to understand the present crisis of the concept of truth. Second, it might be a good idea, after all, to give up truth, if we find a worth replace. Truthfulness, I argue, might be such a replace.

**Filippo Ferrari** (Universität Bonn) & **Sebastiano Moruzzi** (Università di Bologna)

*Towards an Epistemology of Post-Truth*

The term 'post-truth' has been widely used in recent years to characterise a broad epistemic trend in which persons or groups form opinions by systematically disregarding the informed judgements of the experts and, more generally, the epistemic authority of scientific institutions. Understood in this general sense, the term denotes a variety of heterogeneous phenomena such as: (i) the tendency of accusing one's political opponent of creating hoaxes or fake news in order to delegitimize her/his opinion; (ii) the appeal to emotions as a rhetorical expedient to downgrade the significance of statistical data; (iii) the so-called science-wars—namely a variety of anti-scientific movements such as the anti-vax supporters, the flat-earth society, the climate-change deniers, the creationists, etc. In this talk we will focus exclusively on some core epistemological features of post-truth especially in relation to the so-called science-wars. We present three models of what we call post-enquiry (namely, alt-fact, alt-judgment and alt-norm) that could be used to account for the various phenomena that fall under the umbrella term "post-truth". We then focus on one model—alt-norm—and we critically discuss the following conjecture: there is a common methodological pattern within the science-wars debate which has significant epistemological consequences on how to conceive of the structure of enquiry. The pattern goes as follows: there is a conspiracy thesis that is at the core of (what we call) the anti-scientific doctrine; this is coupled with a tendency of seriously downplaying the epistemic significance of any institutional and/or scientific evidence that could defeat the core conspiracy thesis while at the same time boosting any bits of scientific evidence that can be taken as corroborating the proposed alternative (anti-scientific) view. This epistemic double-standard, we argue, distorts the normative structure of enquiry in some important respects.

**Katherine Furman** (University College Cork)

*On Trusting Neighbours More Than Experts: An Ebola Case Study*

In this paper I argue that rumours pose a challenge to effective science communication. I also argue that it is sometimes reasonable for ordinary laypeople to trust rumours over the experts. The argument goes like this. There are strong fact–value entanglements in the sciences. Further, my friends and neighbours may be more likely than the experts to make value judgments that line up with my own. As such, it can make sense for me to pay close attention to their testimony. It may even make sense for me to trust testimony within my peer network – or ‘rumours’ – more than the experts, especially if the experts’ values are especially opaque or suspicious to me. I ground this discussion in the recent West Africa Ebola outbreak, where rumours posed a substantial challenge to containing the epidemic.

**Tommaso Piazza** (Università di Pavia) — joint work with **Michel Croce** (Universidade de Lisboa)

*Fake News Consumption and Epistemic Blame*

Social media and online communities have proven especially hospitable to the proliferation, and wide–spread acceptance, of false or otherwise misleading claims—what is nowadays commonly referred to as fake news (FN). Since the content of most FN pertains to socially relevant issues, this phenomenon increases the chances that we act in the public sphere (by debating, campaigning, or voting) upon a poor or insufficient factual basis. For this reason, the proliferation of FN has come to be regarded as a disease for which experts of various sorts need to find a good therapy. In this talk, we address a normative question pertaining to the epistemology of fake news. This question asks who is to be blamed, and from which point of view, in the process originating in the release of FN, and culminating in the propagation and/or subsequent consumption of misinformation. The reason this question is worth being asked is that experts disagree about the most suitable remedies to the proliferation of FN. Proposed therapies range from promoting a reformation at the level of individual epistemic conducts to intervening at the systemic level by suitably modifying the structure of the informational environments within which fake news is typically consumed. A paramount assumption structuring this debate—and motivating the question addressed in this talk—is that individuals can be legitimately expected to reform their epistemic conduct only if they are responsible for it, namely if they are an appropriate target of (epistemic) blame and praise. For the purpose of addressing this question, we introduce a notion of epistemic blameworthiness. Against the background of this notion, we then ask whether FN consumers across a variety of different informational environments can be blamed. Our analysis focuses on three environments: ordinary informational environments (OIE), epistemic bubbles (EB), and echo chambers (EC). The extant literature tends to accept the answer that epistemic agents are epistemically blameworthy for believing in FN in benign environments like OIEs, but less and less so when they are in malicious environments (EB & EC). In contrast, we show that being in a malicious environment is no guarantee that one is blameless: in fact, it might well be the case that members of EB or EC are epistemically blameworthy for their epistemic conduct.

**Axel Gelfert** (Technische Universität Berlin)

*Fake News, False Beliefs, and the Fallible Art of Knowledge Maintenance*

The term 'fake news' has become emblematic of the pitfalls of public communication in a changed media landscape. Initially introduced in an effort to encourage media literacy, the term has also been co–opted by those wishing to discredit the so–called 'legacy' (or 'mainstream') news media. Yet in spite of its being contested, the term has significant diagnostic potential. It forces us to think hard about what distinguishes merely false reports (perhaps due to simple error) from systematic distortions within journalism. In many ways, it brings us back to an age–old question: What makes something (or someone) a trustworthy source of information? And how can we follow informational routines that limit our risk of being exposed to systematically distorted claims? The present talk surveys these problems and argues that the acquisition of new cutting–edge information may trade off against the goal of knowledge maintenance. By privileging the former, we may endanger the latter, yet both are required if we are to successfully navigate the treacherous oceans of information.

**Fabiana Zollo** (Università Ca' Foscari Venezia)

*Dealing with Digital Misinformation: a Polarised Context of Narratives and Tribes*

The advent of the Internet and web technologies have radically changed the paradigm of news consumption, leading up to the formation of a new scenario where people actively participate not only in the diffusion of content, but also its production. In this context, social media have become central and rapidly established as the main information source for many of their users. However, social media are riddled with unsubstantiated and often untruthful rumors that can influence public opinion negatively. Thus, it is crucial to understand the main determinants behind content consumption and the emergence of collective narratives online. In this talk, we address such a challenge by analyzing massive data from online social media, such as Facebook and Twitter. We show the existence of the so-called echo chambers, polarized groups of like-minded people where users reinforce their pre-existing opinions. Moreover, we study the role of confirmation bias in content consumption, address the emotional dynamics inside and between different narratives, and analyze users' response to both confirmatory and contrasting information (fact-checking). Finally, we investigate possible communication strategies to improve trust, smooth extreme polarisation and promote civil debate around controversial topics.

**Giovanni Maddalena** (Università degli Studi del Molise)

*Three Defences against Fake News*

The paper argues that during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when means of propaganda and manipulation were further improved, the concepts of truth and reality deeply changed; these concepts, despite being subjected to major transformations, have always kept a mutual recall, so as to create a bank against manipulating actions and agendas. The new cultural landscape and the new communication practices have willingly or unwillingly generated some unexpected impacts. Among the most relevant: the intrusion into the political and media scene by new "unauthorised" subjects, who demonstrated to be able to use these powerful tools very successfully. The unedited redefinition of the communicative hierarchies produced by the world wide web, where anybody can potentially be a broadcaster, producer, opinion leader or influencer. The possibility to access and control from the bottom the "horizontal" communication of social media through a systematic and coordinated use of posts and messages. The risk of the growth of phenomena of self-reference on the Web, where communication takes place above all among peers and do not facilitate the openness to the other and the different. This unprecedented scene, with its new risks, poses serious questions about the fate of democracies, so that on many sides people wondered which were the strategies of resistance and contrast. The paper takes into account and critically analyses the main options available in the present debate as an increasing of critical thinking and control, and eventually puts forward an original proposal based on a rich, metaphysical, relational realism.

**Anna Maria Lorusso** (Università di Bologna)

*Fake News and Post-Truths: between Hermetic Semiosis and Gossips*

The aim of my talk will be to reflect on some communication models of fake news, starting from the assumption that fake news are not mere falsehoods (reducible to trivial lies) but are often something more complex. The issue of post-truth is not in my opinion attributable to a problem of spreading falsehood but to a problem of a confusing overproduction of reality's versions.

The three basic steps of my talk are:

- 1– it is a mistake to think that the problem of fake news can be resolved with a return to facts (as the fact-checking make us think). The facts (which will exist somewhere) are almost never the most accessible parameter;
- 2 – the problem of fake news has to do with special interpretative practices (both upstream, at the level of information producers, and downstream, at the level of information reception)
- 3 – it is therefore necessary to reflect on the "limits of interpretation" à la Eco.

Taking inspiration from the eponymous Eco's essay, I will try to see if today's viral fake news matches the hermetic paradigm he studied.

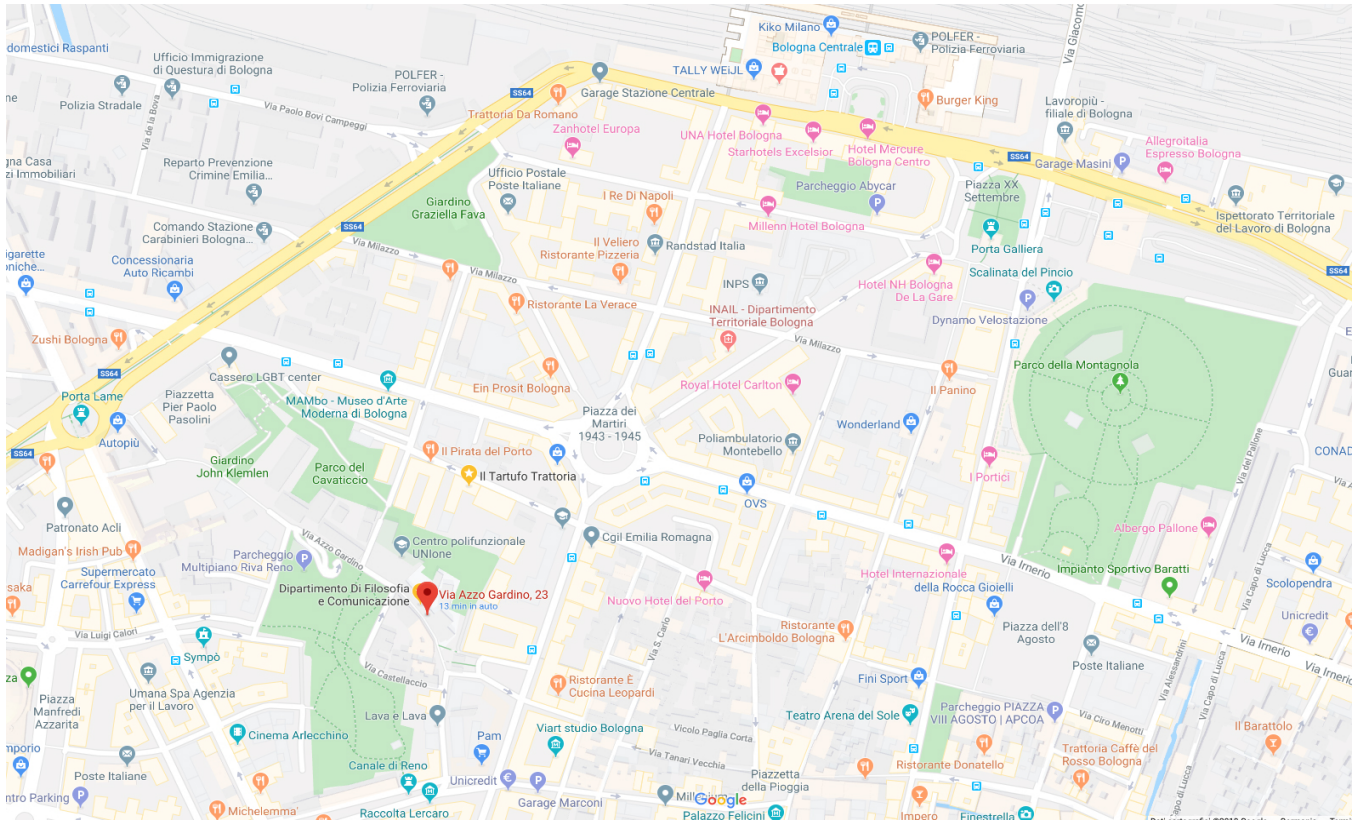
Then I will compare the paradigm of the hermetic model with that of gossip model (both studied by semiotic scholars) to see which is more useful for describing today's disinformation practices, coming to sketch a third paradigm, that seems to me dominant today, which I provisionally call a notice model.

# Post-Truth: Philosophy, Sociology, and Media Studies

## Additional Information

### Host Institution & Venue

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